

The Silent Crusader in Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Rajmohan's Wife*

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Abstract

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864) is generally regarded as the first Indian novel in English. He is widely regarded as a key figure in the Bengal Renaissance as well as the broader Indian subcontinent. Although following in the footsteps of Ishwar Chandra Gupta; Chattopadhyay had begun his literary career as a writer of verses; he soon turned to writing fiction. His first fiction to appear in print was the English novel *Rajmohan's Wife*. Prior to *Rajmohan's Wife*, there was hardly any cohesive narrative which portrayed our contemporary social life. *Rajmohan's Wife* presents a realistic representation of East Bengali low life. The dynamism of the story lies in the depiction of Matangini as a "new woman", who refuses to be limited by social taboos. The beautiful and confident Matangini is accordingly portrayed in minute details. Chattopadhyay's *Rajmohan's Wife* seeks to represent a strong woman who reflects the fierce spirit of the national fervor and the undaunted spirit to be free of all social prejudices. As the plot progresses, Matangini's narrative grows stronger. There are strayed hints that this woman has the potential to become another Tilottoma or Mehrunnisa or Kapal Kundala. When, by chance, Matangini comes to know that her husband has joined his hands with a gang of robbers to visit Madhab's household and steal the will, she resolves for the first time to go against her husband, "the man to whom she had pledged her faith before God and Man" to hear the call of her conscience.

Keywords: New Woman, Renaissance, feminist, nationalist, social prejudice.

Rajmohan's Wife (1864) is generally regarded to be the first Indian novel in English. Although the novel is composed in the romantic tradition, involving an adventure story, and has elements of mystery and suspense, feudal intrigues, burglaries, abductions, and love confessions, it also impressively delineates the feelings and passions of Matangini, portrayed against the backdrop of the old, feudal, rural setting of Bengal, who raises a voice of protest.

Matangini, the protagonist of the novel, is seen to be a powerful character, who is unhesitant to follow her passions, and yet at the end, she is deprived of the justice she deserves. The dynamism of the story lies in the depiction of Matangini as a new woman, who is not restricted by social taboos. The beautiful and confident Matangini is portrayed in minute detail. The marriage between Rajmohan and Matangini is a failure, Matangini, however, remains unabashed in acknowledging her feelings for Madhav. We come to know that Madhav and Matangini loved each other since childhood, but could not conjugate their love. This novel therefore, represents the rise of a new woman with an independent spirit.

Matangini is not merely Rajmohan's wife; but as Paranjape views her, Matangini is the living manifestation of the "the 'spirit' [...] of modern India itself".¹ Although, Matangini is not found speaking frequently, she is given ample space within the novel to express herself through internal monologues. She expresses effectively through silences. It is the silent revolution of a nineteenth century woman against feudal conspiracy, against domestic violence that she experiences.

In his later novels, Chattopadhyay had placed many woman characters as protagonists, but the character of Matangini remains first in this long series of bold women who have secured permanent places on the minds of the readers for their self-assertions in a male dominated world. The name 'Matangini' in the novel also bears special connotation. From the derivative point of view, 'Matangini' is the name of the violent Tantric form of the Goddess Saraswati. This is rightly reflected in her revolutionary act when she ventures to step out in the dark night to protect Madhav from the dacoits. Like Goddess Matangini, who yields both the veena and the sword, Chattopadhyay's heroine also rises to the superhuman height of prowess and goes out to destroy the evil hands. It may be mentioned herein, that in Bengali, the name Matangini is often used synonymously with elephant, and much like an elephant the determined actions of Chattopadhyay's Matangini is imbued with a force that has the potential to eventually crush everything which comes in her way in doing justice.

Furthermore, Matangini's journey in the night takes an allegorical proportion in that it is the journey of a woman from home to the world. However, this journey outward has a disruptive potential that threatens to completely breaks the ideology of 'patibrata dharma'², of 'respectability' and 'decency' of the middle class bhadralok sensibility.

The novelist has portrayed Matangini in different colours and shades. Matangini oscillates in her deeds – according to her conscience on one hand and in maintaining social norms as a marginalized

woman on the other.³ Matangini, therefore, appears to be not timid or weak, but a strong feminist and spirited woman who refuses to cower in front of the brute force of patriarchal oppression, as she strives for her rights and the cause of justice. Her adventurous journey through the dark night is a testimony to her resolute will. She carries the plot forward with her own kinetic energy and does not entirely end up defeated though thwarted in the course of her journey.

Matangini has been portrayed as a new woman, who all through her journey struggled hard as she desired to get out of the conventional world. These bold assertions of Matangini in defense of her action, as: "I am your wife" and "I had gone because I thought there was nothing wrong in it."⁴, charged with the agony of long repression, are perhaps one of the very first and few instances in Indian literature in any language of feminism. It attests the woman's full consciousness about her individual rights as a wife and her self-reliance on her own judgment. The symbolic significance of Matangini in this novel may be multifaceted, but it is also undeniable that the way the character of Matangini is portrayed definitely shows the motifs of feminine anguish and revolt. At the core of her character lies a rebel against accepted conventions. At first, she is portrayed as a stereotypical housewife of any Indian village ready to accept the patriarchal codes silently and uncritically. However, as the plot develops, Matangini is transformed into a bold character who is constantly torn between passion, duty and social norms and finally blurts out her doubly forbidden love. However, the novelist cannot reserve for Matangini any happy ending for her faithfulness to reality. The remark of Chattopadhyaya that "Some women are the equals of some men" marks the quintessential statement of the author, which clearly sums up the motif of this novel, as Matangini truly emerges as a woman who is capable of feats comparable in bravery with that of any male hero.

During the nineteenth century in Bengal, it was unthinkable for a woman to even raise her voice in front of her husband. Nevertheless, Matangini is a character who is totally portrayed differently. At first, she was also very down to earth. But slowly, as the plot progresses, we find how even her apparent silence eked out a clearly audible voice of protest against the things which she didn't like. This was really a fascinating turn to see a woman in different shades of colour. Matangini is the most spellbinding character in the novel and that "the conflict between the individual and community is very boldly presented through the passions of a woman in flesh and blood and her predicament to accept the value system of her society".⁵

To conclude, Matangini emerges as a "brave and fearless woman, capable of deep love and wonderful restraint".⁶ However, even in her bravery and courage, Matangini appears to be somewhat limited by the constraints in authorial delineation, for even the brave and courageous Matangini can neither altogether break with the past-world, nor can she be accepted by the new world. Nevertheless, the abrupt ending of the novel by giving Matangini an early death, the novelist puts the readers in confusion.

Matangini represents the image of strong-willed but a sorrow-stricken national woman of nineteenth century India. The story of Matangini is an allegory of the long suffering India

struggling to come out of the brutish forces of colonial rule. She is confined within the four walls of the house. The unhappy, sorrow-nursed heart of Matangini is filled with energies and powers that refuses to be subdued by the stifling control of an unworthy brutal husband. Hence, although Matangini is unhappy, she nourishes a desire to free herself from the traditional bondage that irrevocably binds every woman in a patriarchal society. The restlessness, vitality, charm and drive of an emerging society are thus embodied in Matangini. Thus Matangini clearly spells out her inner self even from a socially marginalized position owing to the novelist's endeavor to lend a voice to a marginalized woman that cannot but be appreciated.

Notes

¹Paranjape, Makarand R. "Bankim Chandra Chatterjee: Colonialism and National Consciousness in Rajmohan's Wife." p. 86

²The concept of Pativrata is the Hindu concept that a wife lives to serve her husband in any way possible, making her life his, and supporting him in anything, even death. This idea is widely accepted within Hindu society

³Samanta, Sugata. "From Subjugation to Emancipation: The Emergence of Unshackled Womanhood in 'Rajmohan's Wife'." p. 135

⁴Chattopadhyay, Bankim Chandra. "Rajmohan's wife". p.123

⁵Choudhury, Sudip Roy. "'Women Question' and the Nationalist Point of Departure in Rajmohan's Wife." p.28

⁶Paranjape, Makarand R. "Bankim Chandra Chatterjee: Colonialism and National Consciousness in Rajmohan's Wife." p. 90

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